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Chapter 56

CHRISTINE ROSS

TO TOUCH THE OTHER

A story of corpo-electronic surfaces

[. . .]

LET US BEGIN [. . .] with this hypothesis: video is a technology which, when it takes a tactile approach to the surface (accentuating the electronic fluctuations of skin, and the body's scintillating contacts with the screen), radically undermines not only the conception of desire as lack but also the notion of the body as a unified representation or distinct biological organism opposed to mind, thought, and the machine. When used in this way, video reduces to almost nothing the distance between the electronic wash of the image, the filmed body, and the viewer.

[. . .]

Touch through abjection

It is important that one always be able to situate, locate and contextualize the corporal and psychic dispersions of the subject, which may be pathological yet beneficial, and may reduce or enhance the complexity of the subject. Such contextualizations are more and more widespread in recent electronic art, particularly in video that deals with questions of diaspora and immigration. Here, in order to survive, the subject must learn to unwrite or even rewrite the boundaries of national and personal identity. In this respect, Mona Hatoum's work is

distinguished by its recourse to the figure of the foreigner who unwrites his or her self by unwriting that of the viewer, a process connected to the fact that sight is constantly called upon to transform itself into touch. But in order for the dissolution of the "correct distance" to take place the foreigner must function as an agent, a status conferred upon it by the construction of a space that simultaneously separates this figure from, and connects it with, the viewer. [. . .]

In the second part of Hatoum's *Changing Parts* (1984), photographs of a bathroom appear at first sporadically and then with increased frequency, and are contaminated by a slow-motion black-and-white video sequence of Hatoum inside a transparent cube. Hatoum's actions are simple and earthy. She presses against the wall of the cube, which corresponds to the screen of the monitor, smearing it with what looks like blood (in fact liquid clay). The tactile nature of this activity defines the screen as an interface that opacifies in order to separate the space of the video artist from that of the viewer. In *Measures of Distance* (1988), the photographed body of Hatoum's mother is also spatially differentiated and delimited by an electronic mesh (composed of a grid and the Arabic script of the mother's letters to her daughter) that textures, marks and stigmatizes the surface of the screen.

In neither video does the screen relinquish its paradoxical dimension of imprisonment and protection of the body. On the one hand, the opacified screen reinforces the category of the "other" insofar as it reproduces the cleavage between the Palestinian body and the Occidental gaze. On the other hand, the screen protects the female body by problematizing visual and auditory access to it. But the paradox does not end there. It is as if the body were using this normative distance not only actively to occupy the space that is granted to it, but also to bolster this distance, and to such an extent that those elements which serve to reinforce distance ("blood," Arabic script) manage to subvert the distance in question, to revoke and dissolve it.

The opacification of the screen through the use of "blood" and script produces a confusion, a confusion facilitated by the black-and-white sequence of *Changing Parts* and the electronic grid of *Measures of Distance*. Also, the screen is contaminated by signs of alterity: the Arabic script (illegible to most Westerners) and the "blood" (menstrual blood, or blood shed in wartime – elements that normally remain concealed). The combination of these two characteristics (the confusion between skin and screen and the contamination of the screen by alterity) subverts the distance between the "foreigner" and the viewer, insofar as it progressively transforms video into an instance of abjection. More precisely, the fact of touch (body-blood-screen, body-script-screen) not only maintains the cleavage between the viewer and the "foreigner," it also manifests the instability of this cleavage: it casts doubt on the permanence of the "correct distance".

The term "abjection," as used by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1980), describes the revulsion and horror involved in the child's pre-Oedipal attempt to separate from its mother, a separation necessary for the child to accede to the Symbolic order and become a subject.¹ Abjection, in its most archaic form, is an oral abhorrence, a refusal of maternal sustenance corresponding to a refusal of the mother, who is felt to be abject. In this refusal, the child itself attempts to project itself outside the mother-child dyad. But, for Kristeva, one's experience of the abject figure does not stop there, since the latter never ceases to haunt the frontiers of the subject's identity, constantly threatening to dissolve its unity. The abject thus belongs to the category of rubbish, of the incorporated-to-be-expelled; it demonstrates the incapacity of modern Western cultures to accept not only the mother, but also the materiality of the body, its limits and its mortality, illness, bodily fluids, menstrual blood, difference, the (m)other.²

In the video work of Mona Hatoum, the screen has become the skin of the other since the latter (as “woman” and “Arab,” and as the “colonized” who must be kept at a distance) touches the screen with its hands, blood and script, and thus can no longer be situated *behind* the screen. Hence the abject character of the images: the other is no longer what the camera records at a distance, it is at the surface (flush with the screen) as a surface (electronic skin). Viewers can no longer tell themselves that they are facing the representation of a body distanced by the framing of this “body”: the latter has already affected and infected the screen where it is dissolved in surface intensities. Because of this body-screen tactility, the other is now flush with “my” space; it is a body that has mutated through abjection.

We learn from these two videos that “we” consider the foreigner only when the latter begins to touch the surface (the screen) that separates us from her: in other words, when “our” skin ego perceives itself to be suddenly threatened, enfeebled and thrown into crisis by the other who has become abject. Only then are we in a position to realize how “our” territory is one in which multiculturalism (as the juxtaposition of *preserved* skin egos) develops to the detriment of interculturalism (as *negotiated* skin egos).³

Desire as communicative body

In Mona Hatoum’s work, desire is developed through an aesthetic that transforms the depth of contact with the other into a surface of contact. Viewers are positioned in a way that forces them to abandon their negation of the other (who is denied because the other – the “woman,” the “Arab” – is what represents the absence from oneself, the lack) in order to be attentive to the very surface of the screen where the body and the electronic apparatus come into contact. This displacement becomes all the more significant in the video installation *Corps étranger* [Foreign Body and Strange Body; Figure 56.1]; for here the transformation of desire-as-lack into desire-as-production is articulated through a tactility performed by viewers themselves.

Corps étranger was originally produced for a 1994 exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou’s Musée national d’art moderne, and was shown subsequently at the Venice Biennale and at the Tate Gallery in an exhibition entitled *Rites of Passage*. A space partially closed upon itself, it consists of a circular area delimited by two semicircular partitions that leave two openings, one for viewers to enter the piece, and one for them to leave. On the floor, projected from above, one can see video images of various internal and external features of Hatoum’s body. Immediately upon entering the space, viewers are placed in a situation of exteriority vis-à-vis images of an internal body that they must apprehend at a distance equivalent to their own body height, a distance measured from their feet (where the images lay upon the screen) to the perceptual apparatus (eyes and ears). But tactile contact with the images is established through the feet; this is a crucial point, and I will come back to it later.

The most disturbing images of *Corps étranger* are surely those that show the visceral body, as it is defined by two optical instruments (the endoscope and coloscope) used to scan certain parts of the digestive system, colon and intestines. The visual scanning sequence is accompanied by an ultrasound recording of heartbeats which echo throughout different parts of the body and are punctuated at regular intervals by the sound of Hatoum’s breathing. The body’s deep cavities are illuminated and examined by the camera in its continual search for orifices. Deeper and deeper it moves, probing these visceral tunnels until, unable to advance any farther, it reemerges only to seek elsewhere, as if compelled to go on blindly without any real goal, without any beginning or end.

One of the most striking ambivalences of this installation resides in the production, by the body, of effects that may be described as simultaneously incorporating and incorporated.

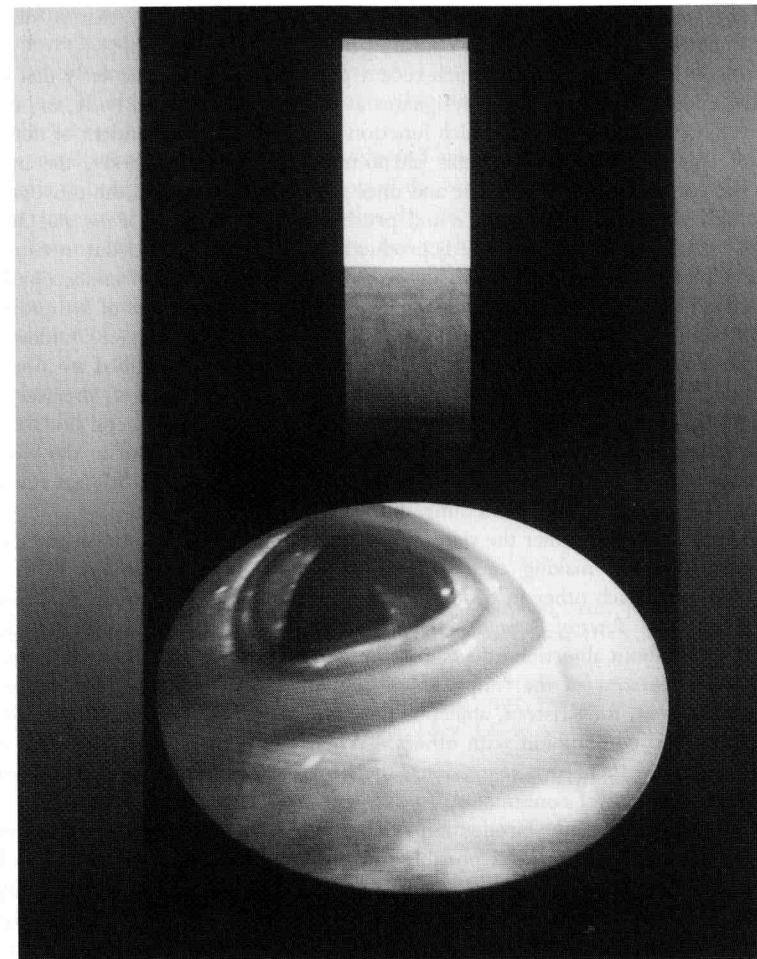


Figure 56.1 Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, 1994.

In the space between the viewer and the images, a gradual oscillation develops between the two effects. In the first instance, the body is represented as incorporated (as much by the camera that penetrates it as by the viewer who follows its movement); in the second instance, the body becomes an incorporating power to the extent that, by following the intrusive action of the camera, viewers feel themselves absorbed by what they are so intently looking at, as if they themselves were being pulled down into the profound darkness of the body’s cavities. This ambivalence assumes its full meaning when one realizes that the body being scanned is the body of a woman. For it is the female sex in its cultural ambivalence – as both a body pure and simple, and as a threatening sex – that holds the viewer’s fascination. Thus the images we see are of a female body reinscribing the link Freud established between the death instinct and the life instinct; in other words, *Corps étranger* reinscribes the fantasy of the *vagina*

dentata, of the woman as vampire or animal equipped with a sexuality that is identified as devouring, enigmatic, dissembling, and castrating for men.⁴

Corps étranger also performs that which recent phenomenology, particularly that exemplified by Drew Leder's *The Absent Body*, designates as the recessive visceral body, or, the whole set of organs hidden under the skin, which function as an absence independent of the subject's awareness of control.⁵ By exhibiting this phenomenologically absent body, the installation transforms the recessive into the ecstatic and once more plunges us into the movement away from depth and absence toward surface and presence. As in *Changing Parts* and *Measures of Distance*, this transformation into surface is productive of an abject effect. But in *Corps étranger* abjection is at play insofar as it points to the extent to which the use of endoscopy in medicine is associated with the diagnosis of illness; that is, with the existence of symptoms which indicate that something, some "it," is acting in a dysfunctional manner. Endoscopy and coloscopy are hermeneutic practices that bring out what Leder has dubbed an interiority in "dys-appearance": a visceral body that appears, that one becomes aware of, precisely because it is dysfunctional. Thus the foreign body is not so much the absent visceral body that tends to disappear phenomenologically from my consciousness as I move about in the world; it is also the dysfunctional body, a body both threatened and threatening, an "it" that reveals itself as something different from me, something strange and hard to control.

Mona Hatoum brings together the visceral body, technology, the Palestinian and the female as incorporating threats, making each category a metaphor or metonymy of the other, projecting them over each other in order to consolidate an abjection effect. In an interview Julia Kristeva gave for *Rites of Passage* at the Tate Gallery (an exhibition that included *Corps étranger*), she spoke about abjection effects in reference to works in the show, describing them as effecting a *mise en scène* of the "impossible," the "disgusting" and the "intolerable."⁶ It is interesting to note that, for Kristeva, abjection here is slated to be transformed into an experience of harmony and communion with others. "When they look at these objects," she says, "they [the viewers] see their own regressions, their own abjection, and at that moment what occurs is a veritable state of communion."⁷

If one follows Kristeva, the production of the body as a dysfunctional surface (the *mise en scène* of the abject) would make it possible not only to represent a state of crisis but also to transform abjection into catharsis, into a communal, quasi-religious experience of harmony. Nevertheless, Kristeva reinforces the metaphysical negation of the other. For transforming abjection into communion is tantamount to (re)negating the other, who has already been denied by the social order and whose abjection is a way of disclosing this fact. Furthermore, it is far from certain that the communion postulated by Kristeva actually takes place, for abjection is and remains a constant. Why? Because in *Corps étranger* the viewer never ceases to enter into contact with the other, even if he or she often does so in an unconscious or involuntary manner.

It is important, first of all, to keep in mind that because their feet touch the screen viewers are not at a "correct distance" from the body shown on video. Unlike *Changing Parts* and *Measures of Distance*, where it is the foreigner who touches the screen in a manner that is threatening to viewers and that makes them aware of their habit of negating the other, here it is the viewer who touches the screen that separates himself or herself from the foreigner. Thus it is impossible to dissociate oneself so categorically from the visceral body in disappearance, or from technology as the ecstatic machine of the recessive body, and of the female sex as *vagina dentata*. *Corps étranger* offers neither communion nor catharsis; nor is there resolution. On the contrary, such closures are thrown into question. This process produces a body that is both living and dying, present and absent, recessive and enraptured, a body whose

contours follow the vicissitudes of its disorganization and reorganization. *Corps étranger* situates the viewer's experience in a circular space, a sort of shelter that also serves as a meeting place for other viewers. Thus the way a viewer touches the screen is akin to the way he or she happens to brush against another viewer within the same exacting space, the way Hatoum touched the screen in *Changing Parts*.

If the installation problematizes the body and sexuality as models of depth and absence, if it attempts to bring about a transformation of the body into surface, it does so by employing a tactility performed by the viewer who thereby becomes engaged in a meeting of surfaces (between her or his shoes and the screen, her or his skin and that of others in the same space). In the video work of Mona Hatoum, touch makes it possible to undertake the work of abjection; but it also opens onto the "communicative body." In opposition to the isolation and dissociation of the disciplined body, the communicative body is constituted through coexistence with the other made possible when the subject attempts to "accept what the other's bodily contingencies have imposed on it as being possibilities for my own body."⁸ The loss through tactility of the correct distance is one of the main conditions that make such acceptance possible.

Notes

- 1 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). [See Chapter 45 in this volume.]
- 2 On this subject, see Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification," eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 80–103.
- 3 On this subject, see Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 23–24.
- 4 On the *vagina dentata*, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death (Short Version)." Unpublished text.
- 5 See Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- 6 Julia Kristeva, "Of Words and Flesh: An Interview with Julia Kristeva," eds. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris, *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), 21.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Arthur W. Frank, "For the Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review," eds. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), 93.